

The Canonical Alfred Hitchcock

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When the call went out, about a generation ago, that the Western canon must be purged of its surfeit of “dead white males,” the cry was loudest in departments of English. (Why this should be so—why it is easier to rally a mob against Milton and Spenser, say, than Michelangelo and Mozart—has never been satisfactorily explained.) And it is more than ironic that that same canon has in the intervening years been expanded to include someone who might be regarded as the double-distilled quintessence of the dead white male—that arch-brutalizer of women, Alfred Hitchcock—and that this should happen precisely in departments of English. In recent years, Hitchcock has been the subject of seminars and surveys throughout the country, almost all of them offered by English departments. A small selection might include “Theories of Authorship in the Cinema: Alfred Hitchcock” (Bryn Mawr); “Hitchcock: Cinema, Gender, Ideology” (Tufts); “Hitchcock in England and America” (Vanderbilt); “The Cinema of Alfred Hitchcock” (University of Maryland); and a research seminar on “The Hitchcock Canon” (Berkeley).

There is no question that Hitchcock is a major figure of popular culture. He was one of the founding fathers of the cinematic art and, together with Eisenstein and Murnau, helped define its visual language. So fruitful was he that a single film could spawn an entire genre, as *Psycho* helped create the modern horror film and *North by Northwest* the style and tone of the James Bond films—not so much cloak and dagger as tuxedo and irony. Hitchcock is one of those titans who did not merely work within a medium but utterly transformed it.

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Yet Hitchcock is not treated by the academy as a figure of popular culture, and he is not studied in the same way that, for example, Walt Disney or Norman Rockwell might be. The course descriptions have little to say about the crafting of mass entertainment, public taste, or the long since abandoned distinction among lowbrow, middlebrow, and highbrow. Instead, Hitchcock is treated respectfully as a creator of narratives, and if he achieved a broad popular audience, well then, so did Homer and Shakespeare.

It is remarkable that Hitchcock should remain steadfastly ensconced in the academic canon despite the battering his critical reputation periodically takes. Not long ago, a twenty-five-year old blogger created a stir when he posted a list of ten overrated film directors of whom the worst offender was Hitchcock.¹ Although he was widely and furiously denounced, as he doubtless intended, he was expressing a point of view that has become rather common. It might be summarized thus: “Hitchcock had an uncommon gift for the visual language of film, yet rather than making intellectually challenging art, he sold his gift cheaply to make the cinematic equivalent of penny dreadfuls. In the end, his films are but deft exercises in audience manipulation.” This is more or less the thesis of Terry Teachout’s “The Trouble with Alfred Hitchcock,” which argues that the director, “far from being a great creative artist, was actually a minor master.”² Teachout approvingly quotes the critic Charles North Samuels, who dismissed Hitchcock’s films as “mere containers of stress.”³

Containers of *misogynist* stress, a feminist critic would add. It is startling how many of Hitchcock’s films have at their center an act of violence towards a woman. Over the course of his career, they are strangled (*Frenzy*), dismembered (*Rear Window*), slowly poisoned (*Notorious*), knifed in the shower (*Psycho*), pecked nearly to death (*The Birds*), and otherwise brutalized with great panache and imagination.

And yet feminists, whose approach to Hitchcock could be the subject of another article, seem as absorbed in the director as other critics, sometimes to deprecate but also to appreciate. Certainly there is not the slightest hint of moral judgment in any of the Hitchcock course syllabi, which drily promise

¹Ben Shapiro, “Top 10 Most Overrated Directors of All Time,” Andrew Breitbart Presents Big Hollywood (<http://bighollywood.breitbart.com/>), posted on January 17, 2010, <http://bighollywood.breitbart.com/bshapiro/2010/01/17/top-10-most-overrated-directors-of-all-time/>.

²Terry Teachout, “The Trouble with Alfred Hitchcock,” *Commentary* (February 2009), 46.

³Ibid., 45.

discussions of “sexual perversions such as voyeurism, fetishism, sadism, and masochism” (Tufts) or “gender, guilt and victimhood” (Berkeley).

But most curious of all is that Hitchcock should enter the academy through the portals of the English department, for the most salient aspect of his films is their fundamental visual nature, and their insistence on presenting narrative with as sparing a use of the English language as possible. To place him in the company of authors, however great, does him no favor; if anything, it inadvertently makes of him a minor master. But was he? This, in a nutshell, is the Hitchcock question: was he a major artist, who had profound things to say about the human condition, or was he a lesser artist, who perfected an idiosyncratic personal style in a secondary art? To answer, one must first consider where in the making of films does greatness lie. And few thought harder about this than Hitchcock himself.

“This Is What We Do to Naughty Boys”

Alfred Hitchcock was born in London in 1899 to a family of greengrocers. They were Catholic, which placed them outside the mainstream of protestant England, although Hitchcock would be able to rise swiftly in the meritocratic culture of the new film industry. A single anecdote is known from his childhood, but it is one of those primal events, like Dickens’s harrowing year in the bottling factory, that seems to explain everything that follows. Around the age of six, he committed some minor transgression and his father sent him to the police station with a note that—unbeknownst to Hitchcock— instructed the recipient to lock him briefly in a cell as a cautionary lesson. The experience was profoundly distressing and to the end of his days Hitchcock quoted the policeman’s stern admonition: “*This is what we do to naughty boys.*”

Biographers have stressed the fear and shame of the incident, but it is not the incarceration that is decisive. The characteristically Hitchcockian touch is that he was made to carry unwittingly the instrument of his own punishment. His later films would often hinge on this precise scenario: a character who bears a crucial object or item whose meaning is withheld from him, but not the audience.

Hitchcock came to film through the world of design, not through writing. (Except at the outset of his career, he never wrote his own scripts.) Taught by Jesuits until he was fourteen, he then attended a technical college, where he

studied engineering and drafting, and where he learned the methodical perfectionism that is the hallmark of all his work. In 1920 he was hired by Islington Studios as a designer of titles, that vanished art form of the silent era. Four years later came his formative experience: he was sent to Germany to work on a series of collaborative British-German productions, filming in both Berlin and Munich. There he was exposed to German expressionist cinema during its years of greatest creative fervor, and even observed Murnau at work.

His first successful film following his return to England, *The Lodger* (1927), shows the results of this encounter, which stamped his films to the end. A fascination with heightened emotional states, the imaginative coordination of set design and camerawork, and an almost musical rhythm to the sequence of shots mark Hitchcock as the last of the great German Expressionists. It is conspicuous, however, that few of the courses on Hitchcock (with some notable exceptions) deal much with his silent era work. (In part, this has to do with the way that college film courses are taught. Much of the pleasure of a silent film derives from the abstract play of light and shadow, which is lost when digital projection is used rather than screening actual prints, as is almost always the case now).

Although Hitchcock began making sound films in 1929, he cordially despised the laziness to which this tempted directors and writers. Most films, once they could rely on the microphone, became what he called “pictures of people talking.” Hitchcock stalwartly resisted this development. Throughout his career, he preferred to convey information wordlessly, as in the superb opening of *Rear Window*. The camera pans from a sleeping Jimmy Stewart to the plaster cast on his leg (whose sardonic inscription reveals his name), to a series of thrilling sports photographs, culminating with a shot of a violent car crash with an airborne tire rocketing toward the lens, and finally to a smashed camera. Here we learn that Jimmy Stewart is an action photographer who broke his leg when a car race he was photographing ended in a crash. The entire sequence could easily have been in a silent movie.

It was not mere nostalgia that kept Hitchcock making films as he had in the silent era. Rather, he was convinced that what we see is more absorbing than what we hear, and more memorable. He recognized that the essential truth of any social situation is revealed by the gestures, body movements, and unguarded looks of its participants, and not by the words they say, most of which consist of platitudes or white lies. For Hitchcock, dialogue was so much

froth and foam, while it was the mighty currents that churned underneath that constituted the action. He was not adverse to witty dialogue—his scripts were always remarkably literate—but the dialogue itself served as an accompaniment to visual storytelling and not as a substitution for it. As he told French director François Truffaut, the cardinal sin of a scriptwriter was to say “we’ll cover that in a line of dialogue.”

Hitchcock was constantly on the lookout for situations that were “ocularly interesting,” as he put it, about which he could base a script. His quintessential scenario crystallized in 1935 with *The 39 Steps*: the man falsely accused of a crime who must find the real culprits before they find him, or before the police do. He would return again and again to this formula, from *Young and Innocent* (1937) to *North by Northwest* (1959). (*Young and Innocent* is unjustly forgotten, perhaps because the astonishing one-minute pan through a hotel floor at the climax of the film culminates in the twitching eye of a musician in blackface, so disturbing to contemporary audiences that the film is very rarely screened.) It is wrong to think of these as chase films, since very little actual chasing occurs. Their “ocular interest” consist of the uncomfortable situations into which the protagonist was thrust. These were frequently tense social predicaments in which he struggled to win the trust of an ally while allaying the suspicions of others, tugging him painfully between sincerity and insincerity. These are by far the tensest scenes in his films, as in *The 39 Steps* when the fugitive Robert Donat takes refuge with a forbidding Scottish farmer and his sexually frustrated wife. (Here alone is a semester’s worth of “gender, guilt, and victimhood.”)

In 1939, Hitchcock’s talents brought him to the attention of Hollywood, where he moved to make *Rebecca* and where he remained for the rest of his life. Although he would now enjoy greater resources, he did not lose himself in America, as many an emigrant filmmaker has. While he updated the specifics of his plots, shifting from submarine warfare in World War II to Cold War intrigue to serial killers, the basic architecture of Hitchcock’s storytelling remained the same, turning on the motifs of guilt, suspicion, and fear. He also resisted the temptation to “open up” his movies by filming outdoors (far easier to do in Hollywood than in London). If anything, he pushed in the opposite direction, perversely constricting his stories onto tiny sets, as in *Lifeboat*, where he managed to convey the sprawling scope of a world war within the confines of a sixteen-foot lifeboat.

Hitchcock now enjoyed artistic collaborators of the first rank such as John Steinbeck, Raymond Chandler, Thornton Wilder, and Salvador Dali (who designed the surrealistic dream sequence of *Spellbound*). He began to create more fully rounded characters, as in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), his favorite film. Here, for the first time, we find a character with an inner life, an idealistic sixteen-year-old girl who begins to suspect that her beloved uncle is a conman and murderer. For the next two decades, he went from success to success, the crescendo coming at the end of the 1950s, when he made three of his most famous films in rapid succession: *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), and *Psycho* (1960). These are the films that invariably figure in the syllabi of Hitchcock courses.

In 1967, Truffaut questioned Hitchcock at length about each of some fifty-two films, taking them in chronological order. The result, published as *Hitchcock/Truffaut* (Éditions Ramsey, 1983), is itself a capsule history of cinema and is among the greatest books ever written on the subject. But by this point, Hitchcock had become irrelevant to young filmmakers, who preferred the anarchic authenticity of *cinéma vérité* to the formal precision that he embodied. But what dated him more unforgivably was the way his films took place in a moral universe. This is not to say that they are moral or moralizing; on the contrary, they are no more prudish than Medici Florence, with its poisonings, murderous envy, and assassinated siblings. If anything, the films revel in the glamour and allure of wickedness. But during that decade, guilt—Hitchcock's perennial leitmotif—was no longer seen as a tragic constant of the human condition but a specimen of middle-class hypocrisy to be abolished as soon as possible. Hitchcock never quite regained his footing, and although he would make another half-dozen films, none was an unqualified critical success. When he died in 1980, he had long been spent as a creative force in Hollywood.

But just as the public was forgetting him, a new generation of filmmakers was rediscovering Hitchcock. The generation of filmmakers that came of age around 1970—Scorsese and Bogdanovich, Spielberg and Coppola—viewed Hitchcock with reverence. In contrast to the formlessness of much 1960s film, he offered a highly formal model for visual storytelling in which every scene was thoroughly composed in advance by means of storyboard. They honed their craft by close study of his work, consulting the Truffaut interviews as a kind of bible of filmmaking. It is through their efforts that Hitchcock has remained firmly fixed in the public consciousness for the past

three decades, one of perhaps only two American directors whose name, in the adjective *Hitchcockian*, has entered the English language (the other being Frank Capra and Capraesque). If anything, his distinctive irony is more in fashion now than it was a half-century ago. Such are the vicissitudes that have made Hitchcock a figure of ever-renewed popular and academic interest, even as critics remain divided over the meaning of his art.

Space, Thought, and Shadow

Hitchcock's academic stature seems to rest more on the themes and subject matter of his films—for example, what the Berkeley syllabus summarizes as “the politics of sexuality”—than on their form. Of course, they admire him as a great technician, whose accomplishment had to do chiefly with the stylish *look* of a film: its superb production design, its perfectly paced editing, the consummate control over every aspect of the picture plane. And to be sure, he storyboarded his scripts to an unusual extent, the legacy of his training as an art director, and he liked to preen on set by refusing to look through the eyepiece of a camera, claiming that he had already designed the shot in advance. Indeed, he was flawless as an editor. In the distinctive rhythm of his cuts, alternately tightening and slackening, and quickening to a climax, we become intimately aware of his physical presence, in much the same way that when we listen to a great drummer we seem to sense the pulse of his breathing and heartbeat.

This is a mighty gift, but it is at bottom a technical one. If we remember Hitchcock today, it is for reasons that go beyond mere craftsmanship; it is because of his sensitive understanding of the potential for film to say and show things that cannot easily be done in other genres of art. From his earliest silent work, he saw film as a medium for the imaginative expression of *space* and *thought*. This is his real breakthrough, and he exploited those potentials as no director has, before or since.

It is not immediately obvious that film is a spatial art. After all, the film screen, like the canvas of a painting, is flat. But just as a slow walk around a piece of sculpture will reveal its volume, the movement of the camera, or of actors, makes us aware of space. The paradox is that while every individual frame of a film is like a two-dimensional painting, a moving sequence of shots produces an effect akin to that of sculpture or architecture, in which

there is a fluid experience of space and volume. This Hitchcock exploited to an uncanny degree. He recognized that we become most acutely aware of our spatial surrounding when danger beckons, and we are prompted to flee or hide. Here every barrier and passageway and half-open door becomes charged with urgent meaning. This is why so many of his most memorable films are set in unusually compact quarters, such as a passenger train car, a small apartment, or a lifeboat, where his protagonists are, so to speak, bounded in a nutshell.

But he did not need a tiny set to make us desperately aware of our spatial limits. The most successful example comes in the celebrated scene in *North by Northwest* where Cary Grant is terrorized by a crop duster plane. The attack is preceded by a lengthy scene in which nothing happens: Grant merely waits for his contact, impatiently striding along the roadside next to the cornfields. Truffaut felt that the interlude threw off the film's relentless tempo, but Hitchcock explained that it was absolutely essential. For the scene to work, the audience needed to feel in their bones what the cornfield was like, how flat and exposed it was, and how there was absolutely no place to hide, so that Grant was as vulnerable as a fly on a tabletop. And this required him to pace the bounds of the space several times, so the audience could calibrate its dimensions along with him. Without that vicarious physical sense of space, the scene would be only a rapid-fire montage of scenes of a man running from a plane, and utterly uninvolved, as in so many modern action films where suspense is generated by quick cutting rather than the expressive creation of space.

Hitchcock may have been remarkably inventive at exploiting the dramatic potential of space but his most radical contribution was in the depiction of thought. One of the greatest limitations of film, as opposed to literature, is that it is almost always in the third person; it stands outside and observes. Its natural viewpoint is objective. And while it is naturally suited for showing what characters do and say, it cannot easily show what they think—at least not directly. Filmmakers work around this, usually by relying on a voice-over narration, but this is to import non-cinematic means into the cinema, the equivalent of reading a portion of a book aloud while looking at moving pictures.

Hitchcock was hardly the first to use the camera subjectively, treating the camera lens as the eye of the protagonist so that we see what he sees. But he was perhaps the first to use the subjective camera technique intentionally as a

means of depicting actual thought. By showing us a sequence of images, he leads us through a careful sequence of thoughts so that we come to the same conclusion as the protagonist, so that his thought process and ours are effectively the same. During his early career, he employed the technique piecemeal, but it formed the central subject of *Rear Window*, his film of most lasting significance.

Rear Window inverted his classic motif of the falsely accused man on the run by showing a man for whom running was physically impossible, and who could do little more than look and think. As the wheelchair-bound Stewart looks out his window into his rear courtyard, peering into the windows of his neighbors, he comes to believe that something terrible has happened. He watches the arguments between a traveling salesman and his invalid wife, her eavesdropping onto his furtive phone calls, and finally one tumultuous evening in which he makes repeated sorties into the night with his traveling case. Our train of thought runs parallel to Stewart's, as we come to believe with him that the salesman has murdered his wife and gruesomely disposed of the body. It is a tour-de-force on the theme of looking, and all of its various elements are employed in one way or another: windows, cameras, binoculars, lenses, and even flashbulbs.

Rear Window is the purest expression of Hitchcock's subjective filmmaking approach and it a milestone in cinema, for it demonstrates that an internal sequence of thoughts can be as thrilling as any external chase. It is also extraordinarily well-written. Much of it hinges on Stewart trying to convince his love interest, Grace Kelly, of what he saw. Hitchcock brilliantly used the other lives around the courtyard—a pair of amorous newlyweds, a dancer who practices in skimpy garb, a suicidal wallflower, a struggling composer, and an old married couple—to comment on different aspects of the troubled Stewart-Kelly romance. Of course, the strongest parallels are formed by the salesman and his victim, who like Stewart is immobile, a particularly poignant exercise in the use of alter egos.

The scene where Stewart struggles to think through the partial evidence of what he has seen—and not seen, for he has also dozed during the night of the murder—is simply extraordinary. In a way that is unlike any novel, we find ourselves struggling to think along with Stewart, rather than merely imagining him thinking. This is not to say that characters in novels do not think. It is that the process of thought in a novel is literary, and it proceeds through verbal means. A film like *Rear Window*, however, offers an

experience more like life itself, where we receive sensory information through our eyes and ears, and draw logical conclusions from it. Inevitably this is more direct than the experience of thought in a novel, where sensory information is first compressed into the form of words.

In the end, it is the habit of judging films on essentially literary criteria that has made it difficult to assess Hitchcock, for he is one of the least literary of directors (notwithstanding his superbly literate scripts). It is understandable that any new genre of art will be judged by the criteria of existing ones, as photography was for a long time judged on the same basis that one judged painting. Likewise, films continue to be judged, more than a century after their birth, on literary grounds, using the same yardstick one applies to novels or plays. And since criticism itself is a species of literature, it is always easier to write about films that are highly literary in nature. Criticism has always been kind to films that treat grand themes in a rich and complex way, like the great novels of the nineteenth century. Renoir's *Grand Illusion* is properly regarded as a great movie, but it does not hurt that it has the rich sociological interest of a novel by Zola. Likewise, Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* is a grand historical epic, but it does not hurt that its sprawling conception is the cinematic equivalent of Tolstoy.

This same unconscious prejudice that favors Renoir and Eisenstein because they suggest great novels works against a maker of suspense films. In literature, the suspense or detective novel is a minor genre. This is not necessarily so in cinema. If anything, a genre that draws on light and shadow, urgent movement, and a heightened nervous awareness of space, is quintessentially cinematic. Hitchcock learned this during his encounter with German Expressionism, when he mastered its abstract visual language and developed his lifelong preference for stories that were "ocularly interesting." The popular conception that Hitchcock squandered his vast talent on suspense potboilers is exactly wrong. In fact, it is the other way around: it is his great gifts that drew him inevitably to suspense.

For suspense suited the themes that would come to preoccupy the twentieth-century mind—anxiety, suspicion, the menace of authority—just as sociological concerns preoccupied the nineteenth century in the wake of the industrial revolution and its dislocations. It was not social class that formed his central theme, but the problem of the free and autonomous individual in the vast anonymous apparatus of the modern world; in a sense, his theme was the same as Kafka or Orwell.

This is a rather different theme than the “politics of sexuality” around which Hitchcock studies threaten to congeal. In the end, it does him a disservice to link him to fashions in literary theory, such as the fascination with surveillance that was launched with Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* in 1975. For Hitchcock offers much more than fodder for theoretical vogues. In his intense rendering of the human spirit under duress, depicting the wry rebellion of the individual against the crushing and arbitrary forces of modern life, he achieved a monumental art within the narrow conventions of a popular medium. Far from being a minor master, he will increasingly emerge as one of the major artists of the twentieth century. In his resistance to the dehumanizing forces of his day, in the quiet rebellion of his irony, Hitchcock will be remembered when the reputation of a great many cinema auteurs have soured, for his shadow plays of guilt, fear, and desire say something about the human heart that no novel can say.